

The Failed U.S. Boycott of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics

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As the Sochi, Russia, Olympics entered the field of news, the story of the failed Olympic boycott in 1980 instigated by Jimmy Carter was told in [detail](#) by Politico Sunday.

As Politico writes, Carter was eager to boycott the Moscow Summer Olympics in response to the Soviet Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Carter went so far as to enlist Muhammad Ali as an emissary to African nations to elicit their support for a boycott. U.S. State Department officials were sent to India to convince Ali to take the job.

The night before Ali left for Tanzania, he met with the Soviet ambassador to India, Yuli Vorontsov. Vorontsov tried to dissuade Ali from the effort, but Ali refused him, and went ahead to Tanzania, even though he was not prepared with the proper information. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere was insulted an athlete was sent instead of a diplomat, and Ali, disenchanted because he was accused of being Carter's puppet, started to think of cutting himself loose from the job. Sports columnist Shirley Povich of the Washington Post was blunt, saying, "The whole fiasco was not all Ali's fault. Much of the blunder can be traced to the White House."

Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser and a hater of communism, said after the Afghan invasion, "Afghanistan is the seventh state since 1975 in which communist parties have come to power with Soviet guns and tanks, with Soviet military power and assistance." Rolf Pauls, the West German ambassador to NATO, suggested that the world boycott the Moscow Olympics. Lloyd Cutler, the White House counsel, argued to the National Security Council that the United States should boycott the Olympics only if other strong moves were made.

However, Vice-President Walter Mondale loved the idea, saying a boycott "could capture the imagination of the American people." Cutler came around; he realized that by simply seizing passports of the athletes the objective could be achieved.



Some within the media loved the idea. The Washington Post's Robert G. Kaiser, a former correspondent in Moscow, wrote, "There should be no underestimating the significance the Soviets themselves put on their selection. They have been treating this Olympiad as one of the great events of their modern history." He added that a boycott "would be a tremendous blow to Soviet prestige; but perhaps more significant, the collapse of this Olympiad would send a genuine shock through Soviet society."

CIA Director Adm. Stansfield Turner was not so happy; he said, "The Soviets would also be able to play the role of an aggrieved party before a partially sympathetic international audience and to utilize international disagreements over the boycott to exacerbate tensions between the U.S. and non-boycotting (or reluctantly boycotting) states, probably including some close U.S. allies."

Although 55% of Americans favored a boycott, Olympians hated it. Julian Roosevelt, an American member of the International Olympic Committee, asserted, "Any boycott isn't going to change the Soviets' mind and isn't going to get troops out of Afghanistan. I'm as patriotic as the next guy, but the patriotic thing to do is for us to send a team over there and whip their ass." Al Oerter, a four-time Olympic gold medal winner with one more shot at age 42, echoed, "The only way to compete against Moscow is to stuff it down their throats in their own backyard."

Meeting with his foreign policy team, Carter said, "It's the toughest question of all for me... I don't want the onus for the failure of the Olympics to fall exclusively on the United States... It must be seen as a legitimate worldwide political reaction to what the Russians are doing in Afghanistan."

Carter announced the boycott on Jan. 20, on Meet the Press, asserting, "Unless the Soviets withdraw their troops within a month from Afghanistan," Carter would insist "that the Olympic games be moved from Moscow to an alternative site, or multiple sites, or postponed, or cancelled."

Announcing the one-month deadline was a mistake; it left Carter with no wiggle room. Yet Carter was adamant, saying, "Regardless of what other nations might do, I would not favor the sending of an American Olympic team to Moscow while the Soviet invasion troops are in Afghanistan."

International Olympic Committee President Lord Killanin scoffed at Carter: "There is no alternative besides Moscow anymore. It's Moscow or nothing." Carter's Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti felt that the only way to make the boycott work was to convince the United States Olympic Committee, or force Congress to do his dirty work for him and prohibit American participation by some means. In his State of the Union speech soon after the boycott announcement, Carter declared, "Neither the American people nor I will support sending an Olympic team to Moscow."

Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Union's ambassador to Washington, was stunned by Carter's stance, writing later, "For all my experience of anti-Soviet campaigns in the United States, I had never encountered anything like the intensity and scale of this one. What particularly caught my attention was the president's personal obsession with Afghanistan."

Olympians were not only worried that they could not compete, but also at the chance Carter's boycott could wreck the Olympic movement. Bob Mathias, the legendary gold medalist who later was a four-term congressman from California and served as the director of the Olympic Training Center at the time of Carter's action, said, "We're going to fight to the end. We're fighting for the life of the Olympic Games. It's almost too late. I'm afraid it might be."

In early February, Carter sent Lloyd Cutler to demand that the Olympics be postponed or canceled from Lord Killanin. Killanin later wrote, "I was, as it turned out, to get a great

shock. I discovered that Cutler had not flown in from Washington to discuss, but rather instruct. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Afghanistan affair, the judgment of one man, already scrambling for his political life in the American presidential election campaign... had turned the Olympic arena into what was to be its own battleground."

Then came the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. Just before they started, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance spoke at an event opening the Games. He said, "Let me make my government's position clear. We will oppose the participation of an American team in any Olympic Games in the capital of an invading nation."

Phil Wolff, the chief of staff of the Lake Placid games, was shocked. He said later:

That night was the only time in my life I've been embarrassed to be an American. I spent three years fighting in World War II. Nobody has a deeper love of this country than I do, but that was not right to be so derogatory and political when we're supposed to be welcoming all our guests from around the world.

Cutler wrote legislation giving Carter legal authority to prevent the U.S. Olympic Committee from being a part of the games (USOC) and banning U.S. media from covering the Summer Games. The Department of Justice protested, arguing that Congress did not even give the president the power to control the media even if there were a war.

Meanwhile, at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, the U.S. hockey team defeated the heavily favored Soviets, firing up American enthusiasm. A White House aide informed Brzezinski, "The Olympic situation seems to be disintegrating. If we are not careful, our magnificent hockey win may fuel domestic sentiment against the boycott." Brzezinski decided to give in, and was joined by Nelson Ledsky, head of the State Department task force on the boycott, who echoed to Vance in early March, "The starch seems to be slowly going out of our boycott effort."

British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher said she would not seize the passports of British athletes, or any similar action to support the boycott. In mid-March, U.S. invitations to 25 countries to organize alternative games only convinced twelve countries to attend the meeting.

The last-ditch effort meant Carter needed the USOC. In late March, there was a meeting in the East Room of the White House. When Carter entered, none of the athletes stood or applauded. Carter said to them,

"I can't say at this moment what other nations will not go to the Summer Olympics in Moscow. Ours will not go. I say that not with any equivocation; the decision has been made. It's not a pleasant time for me. You occupy a special place in American life."

On March 22, France, Spain, and Italy agreed to attend the Moscow games; Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, also said it would go. Carter finally did convince the USOC to support the boycott, although many were unhappy; one delegate said, "I feel I have no choice but to support the president or be perceived as supporting the Russians," a delegate remarked. "I resent that."

Eighty countries attended the Moscow games in 1980; 36 world records were set.

Carter was gone by the end of the year.

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